



Congress of the People, Kliptown

Congress Call

This post is about the preparations, from 1953 onwards, for the 1955 Congress of the People (CoP); about the Congress of the People as a definite event; and about the Freedom Charter that came out of that event, all considered as historic acts and as part of the process of building the South African National Democratic Revolution (NDR).

What could very advantageously be used for this discussion is an electronic copy of the book by Jeremy Cronin and Raymond Suttner, published in 1986, called “30 Years of the Freedom Charter”, or even just a good extract from the book. But unfortunately the book is not available on the Internet. Instead, it has been polished up and re-published as “50 Years of the Freedom Charter”, in hard copy only. If you can get

either one of these editions, do use it to prepare for this discussion.

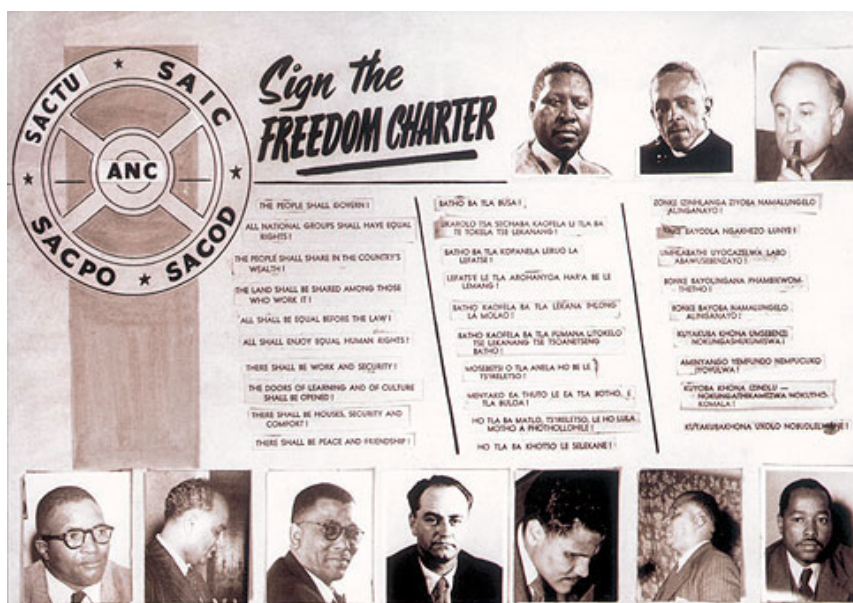
“The Congress of the People and Freedom Charter Campaign”, by Ismail Vadi, Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, 1995, is another book that comes up in searches of the Internet. Vadi’s book has recently been re-published in South Africa.

According to the small samples of Vadi’s book that can be read on line, (i.e. the [Introduction](#), the [Preface](#), and the [Foreword](#) by Walter Sisulu) the planning of the CoP began in 1953, and the campaign was only wound down in 1956, the year of the beginning of the Treason Trial, which was a consequence of the CoP. The Treason Trial continued until 1961, by which time all the defendants had been acquitted.

Another document on the Internet is a short [History of the Freedom Charter](#) on the “non-partisan” South African History Online web site, funded by the Ford Foundation, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, and other liberal philanthropists. “Non-partisan” in the case of SAHO therefore tends to mean that the Communist Party is mentioned as little as possible. Nevertheless, these pages bear out the extended nature of the political intervention that was the total CoP Campaign, a campaign that was a clear extension of the National Democratic Revolution policy of the recently-banned CPSA and of the Comintern before it, since 1920.

The CoP/Freedom Charter campaign was a determined and visible construction of a national democratic project. It involved huge masses of people. It was a self-conscious, deliberate and fully worked-out design, even to the Nehru-

style caps in ANC colours that the Volunteers wore. [See the photo above showing the platform at Kliptown, with a Volunteer in attendance]



There is an error in the SAHO text: There were five organisations involved, not four. SACTU, the non-racial South African Congress of Trade Unions, was a late entry to the CoP but it made the cut and it managed to feature in the “wheel of unity” that nowadays still forms part of both COSATU’s and the ANC’s logos.

The second image shows the document that was used to publicise the Freedom Charter after the Congress, including the newly-pasted “SACTU” acronym, and the “ANC” acronym shifted from the rim to the hub of the wheel. The document includes quotes from the Freedom Charter itself.

This series is about the NDR. This post and the reading are given so as to invite you to consider the whole episode of the CoP campaign from 1953 to 1956, and the subsequent struggle around the Treason Trial, as one of the strongest specific and historical contributions to the NDR.

The document linked below includes the “Call to the Congress of the People”. This was a mobilising flyer and it shows very clearly the large scope and scale of the call to “all Unionwide Organisations”.

The Freedom Charter was much more than a list of demands. It was an integral part of a kind of conscious nation-building which had real revolutionary content and which demonstrated real democracy in action.

Those old comrades laid down an irresistible pattern. It appealed to the heart as well as to the eye and to the mind, and it still surrounds us today, manifested in the continuing Congress Alliance of which the SACP, legal once more, is now an open part. There was never a time when the communists were not part of the National Democratic Revolution. It is theirs, as much as it is anybody else’s. It is family.

As it was when Lenin spoke to the [Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920](#), so it was in 1955. Two things were required. One was a genuine class alliance and unity-in-action against the main oppressor class, the colonialist monopoly capitalists. The other was the deliberate extension of democracy for the creation of a democratic nation. The CoP campaign was exactly in this mould.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Call to the Congress of the People; Freedom Charter](#).
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here](#).